Plant could boost Oconee's prospects

Overflow business expected from Caterpillar plant in Athens, Ga.

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee County could soon be in competition with Anderson County for overflow business from a Caterpillar Inc. plant setting up shop in Athens, Ga., next year.

Economic Development Director Richard Blackwell broke the exciting prospects of what the Caterpillar operation could bring to Oconee during his report to a County Council panel this week.

Blackwell thanked councilmen who sit on the Planning and Economic Development Committee for their commitment to getting sewer into the Golden Corner Commerce Park. He said the Fair Play facility likely would be a magnet for overflow business from Caterpillar.

The county is allocating $6.4 million in the 2013 budget for what it calls the "Sewer South" initiative.

Blackwell said the Golden Corner industrial site has "a tremendous amount of potential" because of its location less than two miles from Interstate 85.

Blackwell told councilmen that he is working with the South Carolina Department of Commerce in presenting a marketing plan to Caterpillar Inc., which announced earlier this year plans for a $200 million manufacturing base in Athens that's expected to open in late 2013.

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>
> **Richard Blackwell**
> Director, Economic Development

Caterpillar has estimated that the new facility would create 1,400 jobs once it is fully operational. The company also expects suppliers and independent satellite companies to bring almost 3,000 additional full-time jobs.

Industry analysts predict the economic impact from the Caterpillar plant in Athens will top $2 billion annually as key suppliers locate in the region and the regional supply chain matures.

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PROSPECTS: Is new spec building coming?

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Blackwell said the close proximity of Caterpillar's future operations in Athens to the Golden Corner site bodes well for the county. He has a hunch that suppliers and satellite companies will be looking at Oconee.

"Those suppliers aren't going to venture far from the quote-unquote mother ship," Blackwell said.

"If they come to South Carolina, which I think they will, it's going to be to Oconee or Anderson ... that's the closest proximity to the site in Athens."

Blackwell said he plans to continue to aggressively market Oconee County. He said part of that function is connecting the dots of all of Oconee's assets, including broadband, the Propex facility that he has renamed the "Seneca Rail Site," the Echo Hills industrial park and the empty speculative building off Highway 11.

Blackwell said councilmen should start thinking about building a new spec building.

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't challenge you on product development," he said.

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